JOHNNY'S CALF AND PA'S COW

By WINNIFRED REEVE

Johnny's wry smile was both sheepish and reminiscent of baby days, as, with a furtive glance to make sure no one was looking, he hung up his dilapidated stocking.

I don't know what he dreamed of, but he talked in his sleep of skates and bob sleds, and once he let out a loud "whurroo!" which woke his heavily snoring parent, who sat up in the creaking bed scratching his head and murmuring:

"Gosh ding it all. Them guinea hens would wake the dead."

Now Pa's regular rising hour on the farm was 5 a. m., Ma getting up an hour earlier, and Johnny the same hour.

Christmas morning dawned warm and snowless, as it sometimes does in Sunny Alberta. That whistling wind, sweeping over the Rockies, under a Chinook arch in the sky, had come in the night, to dissipate the snow and the zero cold of the previous days.

Ma First to Arise

Ma, with one of her weary sighs, was, as usual, the first to arise. As she was drawing on her heavy woolen stockings, Pa grunted something about calling Johnny, adding that that boy needed "bawlin'" out every morning in the year, he was that darned lazy. Then launched, even in half sleep, upon his favorite theme, the farmer mumbled: "Why, at his age, I was...." Followed then a growling murmuring recital of the hard work done by Pa at Johnny's age, a tale heard often by Johnny and his mother.

The latter, twisting her thin grey hair into a knob at the back interrupted Pa's gratuitous recitation of his pluck and efficiency at the age of ten. The woman said:

"It's Christmas Pa. Let 'm sleep a bit longer."

Ma's unexpected intervention aroused pa to complete and irate wakefulness. He jerked up in bed, and through the dim light filtering in from that five o'clock sun, he glared at his wife.

"Pigs Is Pigs"

"Christmas or no Christmas, cows is cows, and so is horses and pigs. They want their Christmas eats just the same as lazy boys who oughter be out milkin' and feedin' and waterin' the stock, as his father done at his age. Of course...." Pa thumped out of bed in his rising wrath, "the old man's here to get up and do the chores that a big husky boy's too lazy to do Christmas mornin.' Doesn't matter 'bout the old man."

Angrily, Pa thrust first one and then the other knotted foot into his overalls. Ma was vaguely wondering how long it would be before Pa's temper would subside. Pa always arose with a grouch, "got out of the wrong side of bed," as the weary woman would have put it, but the rule was that by the second cup of coffee Pa's grouch lost somewhat of its pep; by lunch hours he was merely taciturn or morose, and by supper at night, he showed himself in genial mood and almost fit to live with. As Ma contemplated him now, furiously hitching himself into his "harness," she wistfully wished that Pa's moods would turn upside down. She would have preferred him to be genial in the morning, and cultivate his grouches at night.

Mood Belligerent

He thumped down through the dark hall, making as much noise as possible, his expressive black and roughled hair, revealing to Ma, who followed in his wake, a belligerent mood. As he picked up his milk pails she timidly plucked his sleeve.

"Pa," she said, "wait a bit, I got something to show you. It—it ain't much—jest a little Christmas present I made for you, Pa."

Mollified against his will, and holding to his grouch, Pa, however, permitted himself to be drawn into the murky shadows of that joyless looking parlor.

"I'll keep you warm," said Ma, gently, and handed him the snowy package.

She had wrapped her gift in white tissue paper, acquired at some recent box social, and had tied it about with bright red string, so that it had a real Christmassy look. Pa's thick fingers pulled at the string clumsily and his hard face softened slightly as he opened the cardboard box. A warm muffler, in brown and red was Ma's Christmas gift. She stood now, expectantly, the eternal feminine in the woman peering out of her wistful, questioning eyes, waiting for Pa to hand her that return Christmas gift that Pa never intended to give. But Pa was a diplomat under all his thorny and mean exterior, and though a war maker himself, he demanded peace from the rest of his household. His face was screwed up into an affable grin and he lowered his voice in that condescending way of one bestowing a great favor on a humble and undeserving subject.

Two of Litter's, Ma's

"Two of the litter is yours, Lizzie," he said. "Take your pick of the bunch There's thirteen, though one's a runt."

A wintery smile trickled its way across Ma's thin visage, for Ma's memory was good, and 12 months before Pa had given her a similar gift. She said with assumed warmth, with Johnny, vividly at the back of her mind:

"Thanks, them pigs is good stock. If we can fatten 'em for spring, I expect they'll fetch quite a figger in Calgary.

Pa grunted something about barley being danged high just now, and one couldn't afford to feed pigs on grain in these days, and Ma patiently rejoined that she'd be awful careful; she even saved the dish water because a certain amount o' food always sticks to them dishes, and the pigs is fond o' soap."

Pa thus unexpectedly brought out of his bad humor now turned back to his milk pails with a better grace, but just as he was about to pick them up the door of the room was impetuously shoved open, and a boy's young voice sang out:

"Hi, Pa, you got the milk pails? Give 'em to me. I ain't goin ter let you milk Christmas mornin.'"

Johnny, eyes bulging in an effort to peer through the morning gloom, to see what might have befallen that stocking, grabbed the pails from his father's reluctant hands, and, whistling loudly, betook himself barnward.

The Empty Stocking

In the dim light of that Christmas morn, Johnny's Pa looked at his mother, and found her gaze fixed upon the direction that Johnny's hopeful had taken. The gathering light of dawn revealed, hung against the wall that tragically empty stocking. Ma's thin work hardened hands were twisted fiercely in her apron, her lips trembled and twitched as she strove to control herself by an heroic effort.

"I'd a made him one too, but boys ain't stuck on woolen things, socks and sech for Christmas presents, and I didn't have no money to buy him nothing. C-could'nt you give me somepn' Pa, to put in Johnny's stockin'?"

"What cher want?" roughly queried Pa. He was feeling uncomfortable and mean, but the thrifty, canny streak was still on top.

"How about a bit o' money?" pleaded Ma. "Then he kin get what he likes best himself first time he goes to town with the cream."

Money Was Different

Now money was something that Pa was not accustomed to hand out to his family. He considered himself a generous provider, the excellent fare on the farm table being evidence for all the world and brother farmers to see. Pa never paused to consider that the greater part of the farm food had been paid for in trade with the eggs and butter that had contributed to bend Ma's back in the long years of hard work. He gave no credit to her industry and art, as he passed around with pride the light and fluffy biscuits that Ma had made, the vegetables from the garden Ma had planted and tended, and later canned or the savory ham and bacon that Ma had cured and smoked. Pa's chest swelled with pride at the thought of himself alone as generous provider, and what more could a man's family ask of him? Money? What 'in heck,' should a woman or boy know about money? They "ain't possessed of the brains to understand complucated things like that." Pa knew just how to use every dollar and cent that he did not tuck into the bank. His large, red barn and grannaries, his shining new implement and tool house, his well fitted up blacksmith shop and cattle shed, were all evidence of his intelligent disposal of money, and, in time, he even contemplated giving a coat of paint, and "mebbe a new roof," and "mebbe even an addition," to the old shack in which he and Lizzie had homesteaded, and were still living.

Ma Sheds Some Tears

So now when Ma timidly broached the matter of money as a Christmas present for Johnny, Pa felt injured and stung. He shook his head in vigorous negation, but stopped midway in the shaking, at the unexpected action of Ma. She had lifted that twisted gingham apron to her eyes. Pa could not recall the time when he had seen Ma cry, and the sight was not a pretty one, or calculated to soothe his ruffled feelings. Moreover, from the direction of the barn that young voice was now raised in hopeful song. Johnny, to the accompaniment of the milk as it tinkled into the pail was relieving his pent up feelings.

Hope lives eternally in the heart of a boy, and for some inexplicable reason, and in spite of his knowledge of his father's character, Johnny milked happily away, under the deluded notion that his stocking was full.

Meanwhile Ma was having what the astonished man considered to be a "fit." From weeping into her apron her breath coming in hysterical gasps, Ma was beginning to raise her voice in frantic upbraiding.

"We got to put somepn' in his stockin,' We got to. It ain't right to leave it empty. We ain't treatin' that boy fair."

Note that Ma included herself in that "we," though well we know that there was not a pinch of Pa's meanness in all her hungry body or soul. Pa's eyes popped, and his mouth was agape.

"Ain't treatin' him fair," he bellowed, working himself up to a state of righteous indignation. "Do you know any other boy with a better home? At his age I had to get out and hustle to earn my bread and butter, and...."

"S-so does Johnny."

Pa Is Amazed

Amazement bulged from the features of the now thoroughly outraged farmer.

"What! Him!"

"Yes," flared the woman. Having crossed the boundary of defiance, Ma plunged deep in, feeling a fierce joy in her gound toward freedom.

"He works as hard for you as if you was a stranger, harder, cause no stranger'd have the nerve to make him work ten and twelve hours a day, and if he was workin' for a stranger he'd be earnin' more'n his board."

"He ain't worth more'n his board" shouted Pa.

"He is," shrieked Ma. "He did a man's work in the field all summer. You'd a had to pay a man as high as $70 a month for what our Johnny done."

Pa stared dumbfounded at this strange creature before him. On and on she plunged, going even deeper and deeper.

Took Advantage of Johnny

"It's because you don't have to pay hired help that you've been able to make money, and other farmers like you. You take advantage of your own sons, and you stick 'em to work when they're nothin' but babies. If you was livin' in the cities the truant officers'd get you, but just because we're miles off, you take advantage, and Johnny and other boys like him has got to git sacrytliced. He's not gettin' to school as he oughter. You're keepin' him home on every excuse, and although he's ten, and can do a man's work, in the field, he ain't even through the second grade yet...."

She paused for lack of breath, the words, having come from her in a hysterical torrent, and Pa jumped into the breach, snarling:

"Second grade! By God! I'd a considered myself in luck if I'd a had a single year of school. When I was his age, I...."

Suddenly Ma screamed, advancing upon him with menacing clutching hands.

"Shut up about when you was his age! I'm sick and tired o' hearin' 'bout when you was a boy. I don't believe you done all the things you said you done. I don't believe you was any more wonderful as a boy then you are as a man, and you ain't much of a man or you wouldn't be refusin' a little Christmas present to your own boy, you wouldn't or...."

Pa backed in alarm before the woman's advance, pop eyed, back to the wall, he faced this unknown creature Gradually his expression underwent a cunning change. Half conciliating, half reproachful, he met Ma's fierce gaze. We have stated before that Pa was a diplomat, and here we offer further evidence to prove it.

Pa a Diplomat

"Ain't you just flyin' off the handle a bit premature?" said Pa, "who said I wasn't givin' my boy a Christmas present? Hold your horses, old lady, till you get yer facks."

Pa's chest was visibly swelling. A beaming of expression of peace and good will with all the world spread over his ruddy face, while his tight mouth loosened up into what, for Pa, was meant as a real smile.

"Hee! Hee!" chuckled Pa. "I got yer guessin, heh, old woman. Betchu don't guess what I got for that young one."

"What is It? I ain't seen nothin'—not a thing!" asserted Ma.

"Sure you seen it, unless yer blind. Lookahere, old gell—" Pa always called Ma "old gell" when in affable mood. "The Christmas present I got for Johnnie....."

At that moment the two became aware of Johnny, ears strained to catch every word, standing at the door. He went on glibly, "....and it ain't something small and triflin' enough to go in a stockin' mind you. Let me tell you what I'm givin, that boy this Christmas. He lowered his voice confidingly, being careful, however that his enlarged whisper should reach the boy at the door. "I'm givin' Johnny for a Christmas present a six months' old calf." Out came his chest like a pouter pigeon's. "What do you know about that?" demanded Pa, in high glee.

Johnny's Roan Calf

"Pa!" How may one print that little word, with its world of ecstatic eloquence, as it burst from Johnny's young lips. "Pa, you don't mean the Roan calf do you?" he cried in pent up excitement.

Pa hadn't meant the Roan calf, but he said:

"Sure, I mean the Roan one."

"Gee+" The boy fairly leaped up in the air. "I'll doll her up and enter her for the spring fair, and mebbe I'll get a prize like Philly Brown got and—when she grows up, I'm goin' to....."

"Johnny," said his ma, very gently. "Go on out a bit, please. I got somepn' I want to say to your pa."

With a whoop, Johnny burst out of the room and dashed in the wide melting sunshine of that Alberta Christmas day, across the barn yard, by the corrals and down through the pasture to the slough, at whose edge, the roan calf pressed up against its mother, was taking her Christmas meal.

Ma and pa alone in the farm parlor looked at each other in silence, and then before that steady accusing look of this unknown Ma, Pa's own eyes dropped. She had advanced to within a few paces of him and her scrawny neck was stretched out till it seemed as if made of rubber.

Ma Rebels at Last

"Listen to me, Pa Munson. I been married to you fifteen years. I come out here, and I homesteaded with you and I did more'n my share o' the work, and I ain't never kicked, and I ain't kickin' now. It ain't in me to kick 'cept when somepn' big bursts. That time's come now. This is what I'm comin' to. I never got nothin, all these years for all my hard work but my grub, and every Christmas you've give me somepn' like you give me this Christmas—a pig, or a colt or a calf, or mebbe some chicks or poultry that I raised myself, and they'd be grand enough presents and I'd be the last to complain, if they was reely give to me; but it's all a lie," cried Ma fiercely.. "Yer ain't really givin' me them presents. Yer just foolin me, like you done for fifteen year, and I ain't any longer fool enough to get excited when you tell me of the grand present yer givin' me this or that Christmas, 'cause I know what it means, that as soon as them pigs is growed into pork and the calves into beef, they're yours, and not a smell o' the money that comes from the sellin' will I get. But Johnny's different. I won't stand his bein' fooled, do yer hear? That roan calf's his for keep. It ain't goin' to be no case this time of Johnny's calf and Pa's cow."

Pa met his wife's tirade with such good nature that she was filled with further alarm and suspicion.

Waving his hand eloquently toward the kitchen, Pa said: "Don't you know that by the time that calf's big enough for the butcher or to have calves of her own, Johnny'll have forgotten all about who she belongs to. You wimmen is everlastingly borrowing troubles for nothin'. You attend to yer own knittin, old woman, and Johnny and I'll attend to ours. Hell! ain't we goin' to have no Christmas breakfast, even?"

Christmas Dishes In Other Lands

CHRISTMAS would not be Christmas in Hungary," said my Hungarian friend, "without fruit cake."

"Tell me how it is made," said I.

The description she gave me, well, I think you will agree with me, that it fairly makes your mouth water to think of it. And no wonder, for the luscious loaf must contain citron and orange peel, walnuts and almonds, cherries, dates, spices and hazelnuts. No frosting crowns this masterpiece, as it would in our country, but even so, doesn't it make you hungry?

Gingerbread boys are always baked for the children at holiday time in Hungary. Currants make features, and buttons, but here again no frosting is used. Small sugar cakes belong to the little folks too.

Before Christmas, cakes are placed on the table, and are eaten and replaced, until after Christmas. Such generous hospitality!

One of the large cakes is the famous "Torte." It reaches twelve layers high, just think of it. The layers are very thin, though, and their filling is made of chocolate and butter. The top layer is covered with burnt sugar. Oh, yum. Walnut cake is another of these larger delicacies made in a long flat loaf. Its principle distinction is its walnuts cooked in milk and honey.

Among the gems of the baking art that are a delight to the palate, are some of the Austrian confections.

These come in all shapes, variously decorated, sometimes with nuts, almonds and walnuts, bits of citron for leaves beside bright cherries, and little star shapes covered with sugar.

"Strudel" is a flaky confection, the thin numberless layers of which resemble the net leaves of cabbage. Cheese is sometimes used as a filling with nuts and theh again there is the apple "strudle."

In England there appears the good mince pie and its great friend, the plum pudding. In Dicken's day,—alas, no longer can it be served in this manner in the United States—the plum pudding arrived on the table in state, all alight with burning brandy, with a twig of holly in the midst. Young roast pig especially belongs to the holiday celebrations to commemorate the ancient boar's head of historic fame.

In France more attention is paid to New Year's Day. This is the time for the pleasant exchange of visits, calls, and happy greetings. "Open House" one finds everywhere, with the serving of tea.

Delicious little cakes, "Gateaux" accompany the tea. Tarts are among those present, with all sorts of fillings such as almond paste, and fruits —raspberries, strawberries, and cherries. "Brioch" is another one of these cakes, its pastry resembling our cream puffs without the cream.

Perhaps, with the rapidly changing times in Europe, some of these ancient companions to the Christmas celebration will be pushed off the map. Let us hope not. Let us rather hope that the cook books will be preserved intact, and their palatable arts kept for coming generations.